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ABSTRACT

This report offers some concepts and procedures intended to help teachers in motivating students to physically, cognitively, and behaviorally attend to academic tasks in the classroom setting. A discussion is presented on the importance of assessing and identifying the academic behaviors and subject skills that each student can successfully practice. An instructional approach known as "shaping" is suggested as a means of improving both behavior and skills. This is a procedure in which small steps and successive approximation toward a desired goal or skill receive some kind of recognition or reinforcement. It is pointed out that too much time is spent in attending to and confronting negative student behavior with counter-productive results. Using effective communication techniques to reinforce positive responses from students can diminish the frequency and intensity of negative interactions and improve student performance. (JD)

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IMPROVING THE PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

by John P. Raftery, Ed.D.

G. Stanley Hall (1848-1924), a founding father of American Psychology, when asked to identify the most important characteristic of a good learner stated that the capacity to pay attention is the greatest of the intellectual skills. Most of us would probably agree since we usually learn best when we focus on the task to be mastered. Yet, one of the major problems facing educators of students from urban environments is that of motivating students to physically, cognitively and behaviorally attend to academic tasks in the classroom setting. This report will present several concepts and procedures that can result in improved success for teachers and students.

Increasing attending behavior is a multi-dimensional process that requires powerful and consistent interventions by the teacher. Well documented research studies have consistently identified the conditions that improve human learning. Students achieve when they have a positive relationship with their teacher and when the teacher communicates his/her concern for and belief in the students capacity to achieve. The expectations of the significant others in a student's life can make a real difference in terms of self-confidence, attending and achievement. In a report completed some years ago (Raftery, 1969), the author described a relevant teacher as one who displayed empathy, sincerity, personal security and teacher love. This term"teacher love"is described as the ability to initiate and facilitate feelings of self-worth and personal importance, to perceive cultural differences as a strength and to foster in children the concept that they are worthy of love, respect and success.

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An instructional approach that maximizes the probability of success while minimizing the probability of failure contributes to positive student learning. It is important that before teaching a skill or concept to assess the current understanding level of the student in order to determine at what step success is most likely to occur. Too often teachers assume that a particular skill has already been acquired and they proceed to move on to more advanced tasks. This situation can result in feelings of frustration and failure for both student and teacher. Take the time and make a list of required skills that are necessary to master the concept or task you want your students to learn. The list should consist of skills that are observable and measurable. Design a brief teacher-made test to evaluate the existing skills and then adjust your instructional goals to the identified level. Administering your test to 6 or 7 students at a time while you observe and monitor their performance can provide valuable data about attending skills, frustration tolerance, work-study skills and achievement levels. Group achievement tests from standardized batteries are inadequate when it comes to measuring achievement levels of urban populations. You know what is necessary to experience success in your subject matter and with this knowledge and expertise you can design a valid teacher-made instrument. The information obtained can help you individualize your instructional approach, group your class according to skill levels, assign meaningful homework and most importantly, improve the chances for student success in your classroom.

Now that you have identified the academic behaviors and subject skills that a student can successfully practice, it is time to design an instructional program using a powerful procedure known as shaping. Shaping is a procedure in which small steps and successive approximation toward a

desired goal or skill receive some kind of recognition or reinforcement. Shaping a student's attending behavior would require the teacher to look for behaviors such as sitting at desk, facing the teacher, making eye contact, listening, asking or answering questions and for the teacher to attend to the student at this time and to make a positive comment about the desired behavior. Shaping a student's at-seat behavior would involve attending to all the necessary behaviors (e.g. in seat, book opened, pencil in hand, eyes on book, heading on paper, etc.) and to signify through eye contact, facial or verbal expression that you are pleased with the displayed behavior. In order for shaping to work it is important to start with behaviors or skills that the student can practice and then to select steps in the process that are not too easy or too difficult. Remaining on a particular skill long enough for the student to have mastery before moving on to the next step is necessary. Cues and reminders should be used when necessary.

Schools sometimes inadvertently create conditions that contribute to the very problem that they are trying to solve. The excessive amount of attention and recognition that is given for negative student behavior is one such example of this phenomenon. Significant quantities of physical and psychological energy are directed at telling students everything they do wrong. This results in resentment within them about school, teachers and learning. A recent study found that 77% of the interactions between students and staff in eleven secondary schools was of a negative nature. We frequently confront students about their undesirable behavior to the point where they must act-out to maintain their own dignity, self-esteem and status in their peer group. We suspend students from school and send them out to the street culture to become more skillful at practicing undesirable behaviors. Then, we expect them to return to school with a

positive attitude and increased capacity to adjust to the rules and regulations. Suspensions frequently reinforce the very behaviors that have caused the original problem. When we personalize a student's undesirable behavior or attitude and ignore or refuse to identify any positive behaviors then we decrease our ability to be rational and logical in dealing with the problem.

Take some time to observe yourself and to record the frequency of positive and negative responses that you make during an average day. Force yourself to attend to the positive. Make a list of positive behaviors and read it over several times each day. Practice making positive statements. Refuse to personalize the behaviors of the student. Realize that these behaviors in class result from a multitude of factors and that the students are actually seeking reassurance that the adult is a person who can maintain control and model sensitivity, strength and humor. Do not make a hero out of the student in front of his classmates by focusing on his inappropriate behavior and "forcing" him to confront you. Work at catching students being good, praising efforts and successes, ignoring minor regressions. This can result in positive growth for both you and your students.

Using effective communication techniques with students is another method that can contribute to positive interactions. Adolescents especially tend to over-react to teachers and parents when in conflict situations. The importance of accurate and clear messages cannot be over-emphasized. Speak <u>with</u> the student rather than <u>at</u> the student. Making requests instead of demands encourages cooperation. Avoid the use of labels and instead describe the student's behavior in a calm, non-confrontive manner. Stay on the issue at hand and avoid bringing up past events. Do not make

accusations. Practice using "I" messages instead of "you" messages. If a problem is developing, deal with it in a direct, sensitive manner. Describe the problem, state your feelings and perceptions and suggest possible solutions. Speak calmly and maintain positive eye contact. Ask for feedback from the student and then listen to understand. Request the student to summarize what he has heard from you to be sure you have been clear. Allow the student an opportunity to present his story without interruptions. Too often students are backed into a corner by confronting them with threats, labels or sarcasm and the conditions for increased unproductive conflict are created. If you work at improving your communication skills and let your students know that you care about them as people and have confidence in their goodness, the frequency and intensity of serious negative confrontations will greatly diminish.

Teachers have a significant role to perform in socializing the future citizens of this universe. It can be a difficult, rewarding, frustrating and challenging role-all at the same time. It rarely, however, is dull. Do a psychosocial fitness evaluation of yourself on the issues described herein and plan a strategy to improve your creativity fitness level. Perceive this process as a challenge rather than a threat. Take one class at a time doing the best you can with what you have for that day. Not only will you feel better about your efforts and successes but your students and society in general will benefit from your good work. In doing this you will meet the challenge presented to educators many decades ago by Horace Mann when he said, "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." What better "...victory for humanity" is there than helping young people to be all they can be.

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